

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Agricultural and Forestal Districts: Their Use and Applicability Across the Commonwealth

Valley Conservation Council, November 2009

This survey compiled basic information on all of the Agricultural and Forestal District (AFD) programs in the Commonwealth of Virginia with additional details on programs in the Shenandoah Valley region. Through the 1977 Agricultural and Forestal Districts Act all localities throughout the state are enabled to set up districts. The purpose of the study was to determine the extent of agricultural and forestal districts in the state, learn more about the methods that localities use to administer districts, and update data for districts in the Valley region.

STATEWIDE RESULTS

The first benefit of the study was confirming precisely which localities have AFD programs -- 28 counties, 1 city, and 1 town. These 30 localities all responded to the survey for a 100% response rate. They reported a total of 295 districts covering 684,236 acres. The number of districts per locality varied from a single district to 24 districts. The amount of land conserved in each locality averaged about 24,000 acres, but ranged widely, from a low of 688 acres to a high of 80,410 acres.

Geographically, most of the localities that have AFDs are situated in the northern half of the state, clustered around the Blue Ridge in the west and extending in a band eastward toward Richmond and over to the Eastern Shore. All of the state's top agricultural counties participate in the program as well as scattered localities in southwest Virginia and the Piedmont. Otherwise, the very rural regions and the very urban regions do not tend to see many AFD programs.

Since AFDs depend on landowner interest and organization, the survey asked localities about their processes for promoting districts and handling renewals. Those who promoted districts (63%) mostly used public meetings, mailings, and pamphlets. The greatest challenges listed were 'lack of interest by landowners' and 'staff and resources.' The renewal process varies greatly by locality. The vast majority have experienced requests for early withdrawal (during the term). Desire for development was the top reason for these early requests as well as for decisions not to renew at the end of term. The respondents felt that the greatest benefit of AFDs is their conservation value while the greatest drawback is the lack of incentives for landowners. Future research on landowner opinions would be valuable.

SHENANDOAH VALLEY REGION RESULTS

In the Shenandoah Valley region, nine localities have AFD programs. The number of districts increased since 2002 (from 46 to 53) but the overall acreage in districts decreased by more than 9,700 acres. Losses were most severe in specific districts in the most northern counties.

The report shows that AFDs remain a consistent conservation tool. In order for an AFD program to be established, the locality has to be open and willing to put resources into a program and landowners have to show initiative to get a district started. Once started, however, AFD programs seem likely to continue. Even some northern Virginia counties have retained the tool, suggesting that AFDs can be meaningful even with considerable suburbanization. None of those

surveyed felt that their AFD programs would completely dissolve in the future although acreages might decline. At the same time, it is clear from the pattern of localized abrupt loss in acreage that individual districts cannot necessarily withstand intense development pressure.

DISCUSSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

In follow up to the survey of local governments, the Valley Conservation Council hosted a workshop in October 2009 called “Making the Most of Agricultural and Forestal Districts, Land Use Taxation, and Related Options.” This workshop brought out more information on key issues such as factors affecting district formation; the need for promotion measures; and the relationship of AFDs with conservation easements, land use taxation, and local planning efforts. It is also worth noting that eight localities have the ability to create local agricultural and forestal districts with requirements that differ from the statewide AFDs. Two of these localities have local AFDs and there is the possibility for further use of this tool.

When asked about the future of agricultural and forestal districts (AFDs), none of the respondents felt they would go away. Many sensed they would decline over time or remain steady. Some believed they would increase. It seems clear that AFDs will continue to be a conservation tool used by these and possibly other localities despite the pressure placed on landowners to develop their properties. This seemed to be true even in localities with significant growth pressure.

Based on the survey and related research, as well as discussions at the VCC workshop, the following recommendations are offered to improve AFDs:

- 1) Additional incentives should be explored to provide adequate benefits to landowners willing to limit development.
- 2) The required process would benefit from streamlining and modernization to make it more accessible to landowners and more cost effective for local governments.
- 3) Localities with AFDs should be encouraged to look at proactive measure to promote their programs.
- 4) There may be opportunities to clarify the relationship between conservation easements and AFDs.
- 5) A support network for localities with AFD programs might be helpful.
- 6) Localities without AFDs should be encouraged to consider this option.
- 7) The potential of Local AFD programs should be explored.